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ABSTRACT

There is a common assumption in personality psychology that an individual's attitudinal and/or motivational characteristics influence the selection, interpretation, and encoding of information from the external environment. However, recent reviews of empirical research in such areas as implicit personality theory and person perception offer little support for these theoretical relationships. It was hypothesized that perceiver personality interacts with stimulus attributes and interaction situation to affect social cognition. Subjects observed a videotape of one of four stimulus characters varying in assertiveness and affiliativeness, with whom they expected to cooperate or compete against in an upcoming interaction. As predicted, dominant perceivers focused on target assertiveness in their impressions, while succorant perceivers focused on target affiliativeness. Additionally, expectations about interaction outcomes were more positive when conditions were congruent with personality dispositions, and liking was greater for stimulus characters whose behavioral tendencies complemented those of the perceiver. (Author)

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A Person-Situation Analysis

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Personality and Person Perception:

A Person-Situation Analysis

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There is a common assumption in personality psychology that an individual's attitudinal and/or motivational characteristics influence the selection, interpretation, and encoding of information from the external environment (e.g., Kelly, 1955; Mischel, 1973; Postman, Bruner, & McGinnies, 1948). However, recent reviews of empirical research in such areas as implicit personality theory and person perception (e.g., Schneider, 1973; Shrauger & Altrocchi, 1964; Tagiuri, 1969) offer little support for these hypothesized relationships. Despite a large volume of research, the search for personality influences on person perception processes has been largely disappointing.

The purpose of the present study was to demonstrate that empirical support can be obtained for hypothesized personality influences on person perception processes when the research methodology is based on several conceptual improvements. First, careful attention should be given to selection of the focal personality variables to insure that relatively straightforward predictions can be formulated. Second, information about the stimulus person(s) should be obtained under "naturalistic" conditions (i.e., through observation of behavior, rather than written descriptions of "traits"), and should be conceptually relevant to the personality dimensions under study. Third, close attention should be paid to the perceiver's motivations for acquiring stimulus information. In particular, it seems likely that personality influences will be most apparent when the perceiver

is "outcome dependent" upon the stimulus person (cf., Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976). Finally, empirical work in this area should be guided by models of human functioning which more closely approximate the complexities of social experience (i.e., person-situation interaction models: Endler & Magnusson, 1976).

Within this framework, personality was expected to influence person perception in two ways. First, it was assumed that perceivers are most interested in acquiring information about a stimulus person that is relevant to satisfaction of their personal interaction goals (cf., Jones & Thibaut, 1958), and that these personal goals are largely determined by the perceiver's personality (i.e., interpersonal needs/motives). An individual with a need for dominance, for example, should be most interested in the assertiveness of others with whom s/he interacts, and would be expected to focus on this motive-relevent characteristic in perceiving stimulus persons.

Second, personality should influence a perceiver's evaluation (i.e., "liking") of stimulus persons and expectations about the outcomes of interacting with them. Specifically, it was predicted that perceivers will have the most favorable evaluations of a stimulus person and expectations about the outcomes of interacting with him/her when: (a) interaction conditions are congruent with expression of the perceiver's interpersonal motives (e.g., a competitive interaction for a perceiver with a strong need for dominance); and (b) the stimulus person appears to have complementary behavioral predispositions (e.g., a submissive stimulus person for a dominant perceiver). Thus, while a "main effect" for personality was predicted for impression content (i.e., salience of stimulus characteristics), evaluation of the stimulus person and outcome expectations were predicted

to be a function of the interaction of perceiver personality, stimulus person behavior, and interaction conditions.

The personality variables selected for study were "dominance" and "succorance." These particular traits were selected because they are conceptually distinct, and seemed to embody personal goals differentially relevant to the experimental manipulations of interaction conditions (i.e., cooperation vs. competition) and stimulus person behavior (i.e., assertiveness and affiliativeness). In brief, perceivers who scored highly on measures of either dominance or succorance observed a stimulus person who was either assertive and affiliative, assertive and disaffiliative, submissive and affiliative, or submissive and disaffiliative, under conditions where they expected to interact with the person under either cooperative or competitive conditions.

Method[1]

Subjects

Subjects were 160 male[2] undergraduates, selected from a pool of 364 introductory psychology students on the basis of scores on the Dominance scale of the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1957) and the Succorance scale of the Edwards' Personal Preference Schedule (Edwards, 1959). Half of the subjects had scored above the median (for the pool) on the dominance measure and below the median on the succorance measure, while the remaining subjects had an opposite pattern of scores. Additionally, each subject had a difference of at least ten points between his scores on the two measures. All subjects received monetary compensation for their participation in the research.

Stimulus Materials

Eight short (approx. ten minute) videotapes were constructed for the study, each consisting of two experimental confederates discussing "the benefits of a college education." The male confederates were of similar physical appearance, and each had considerable previous acting experience. The videotapes were based on four scripts designed to manipulate the behavioral assertiveness and affiliativeness of one of the two discussants (the "target character"). Each tape consisted of one of the two actors playing one of four target characters: assertive-affiliative, assertive-disaffiliative, submissive-affiliative, and submissive-disaffiliative. The actor playing the other role in each of the videotapes was moderately assertive and affiliative. Analysis of impression data obtained from an independent sample of 80 male undergraduates confirmed that the desired behavioral manipulations had been achieved, and that there were no significant differences between impressions of the two confederates playing the same target character.

Procedure

Subjects were led to believe that they were going to be interacting with another subject under either cooperative or competitive conditions as part of an investigation of "how well individuals with different attitudes and orientations work together on certain tasks." Each subject was told that he would be able to view a videotape of his "research partner" and another subject engaged in a brief discussion. This was ostensibly for the purpose of allowing the subject to get some idea of his partner's "attitudes and task orientation," and thus prepare for their upcoming interaction. Subjects were also told that they would be participating in a similar discussion to be videotaped and shown to their partner prior to their interaction.

Subjects were run in pairs. After being informed of the nature of the research, each subject viewed the videotape of one of the two confederates (his "partner") playing one of the four target characters. Within personality group, subjects were randomly assigned to interaction condition and target character. After viewing the tape, subjects completed a free-response description of their partner and rated him on a number of bipolar scales, including measures of perceived assertiveness and affiliativeness, liking, and outcome expectations. Subjects were then debriefed and cautioned not to discuss the true purpose of the experiment with others who might be subjects.

Dependent Measures[3]

The free-response descriptions were scored for mention of assertiveness-related and affiliativeness-related characteristics of the target character, and these frequency scores were converted to proportions of the total number of characteristics included in the description. Measures of the perceived level of stimulus assertiveness and affiliativeness, perceivers' confidence in judgments on these two dimensions, liking for the target character, and expectations about the outcome of interacting with the target were obtained from the bipolar ratings.

Results

The data were analysed through 2 (Perceiver Personality) X 2 (Target Assertiveness) X 2 (Target Affiliativeness) X 2 (Interaction Condition) X 2 (Actor) multivariate analyses of variance, with a priori univariate tests for predicted personality effects. Although a large number of signtficant findings emerged from these analyses, only those directly involving person-

ality will be presented here. It is sufficient for the present to note that these analyses confirmed that the desired manipulations of target assertiveness and affiliativeness had been obtained, and that there were no significant actor effects.

As predicted, perceivers focused on personality-related characteristics of the target person in their free-response descriptions. These findings are summarized in Table 1. Dominant perceivers were higher in assertiveness-related characteristics than succorant perceivers in the free-response person descriptions, while succorant perceivers focused more on affiliativeness-related characteristics than dominant perceivers. Dominant perceivers were also significantly more confident than succorant perceivers in ratings of target assertiveness. The two groups did not differ, however, in confidence in ratings of target affiliativeness.

Table 1

Although the four-way Personality X Interaction Condition X Target Assertiveness X Target Affiliativeness interaction was not significant for outcome expectations, significant two-way interactions of Personality and Interaction Condition were consistent with predictions. As illustrated in Figure 1, dominant perceivers expected to be more successful at competitive than cooperative interactions ($\bar{X}$'s = 5.75, 5.40, respectively), while succorant perceivers expected greater success at cooperative than competitive interactions ($\bar{X}$'s = 5.37, 4.80, respectively; interaction F (1,144) = 4.72, $p < .05$). A marginally significant Personality X Interaction Condition interaction, illustrated in Figure 2, indicated that dominant perceivers

also expected competitive interactions to be more pleasant than cooperative ones ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.92, 4.55), while succorant perceivers displayed an opposite pattern ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.45, 4.87; interaction F (1,144) = 3.59, $p < .10$).

Figures 1 & 2

The predicted Personality X Target Assertiveness X Target Affiliativeness interaction for liking was marginally significant (interaction F (1,144) = 2.62, $p < .11$). As shown in Figure 3, dominant perceivers liked the submissive characters more than the assertive characters ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.40, 4.10) and, within levels of assertiveness, liked affiliative characters ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.80, 4.55, for submissive and assertive, respectively) better than disaffiliative characters ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.15, 3.70, for submissive and assertive, respectively). Succorant perceivers liked affiliative characters more than disaffiliative characters ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.87, 3.75), but did not differ in liking for assertive and submissive characters ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.32, 4.30, respectively).

Figure 3

Discussion

Overall, the findings clearly indicate that personality is significantly related to perceivers' impressions and evaluations of others. Provided that careful attention is given to the nature of the personality variables, attributes of the stimulus person, and characteristics of the perceptual situation, a complex set of empirical relationships can be

demonstrated. As predicted, perceivers focused on attributes relevant to gratification of their own personality dispositions in forming impressions of stimulus persons, and their evaluations of the stimulus characters and expectations about the outcomes of interacting with them were more positive when the stimulus character appeared to have a complementary personality (i.,e., submissive for dominant perceivers and affiliative for succorant perceivers), and the interaction conditions facilitated expression of perceivers' personal dispositions (i.e., competition for dominant perceivers and cooperation for succorant perceivers).

Perhaps because the existence of relationships between personality and social cognition seems obvious, researchers have continued to study this process despite scant and inconsistent findings. It is apparent from the present study that the influences of personality on social cognition are quite complex, and in many ways the present findings provoke more questions than they answer. Overall, however, it is clear that when understood within a person-situation interaction framework, a reasonably-sized set of conceptually consistent relationships exists between personality and person perception. Additional research within this relatively comprehensive framework should substantially improve understanding of the type of process underlying impression formation.

Footnotes

[1] Space does not permit discussion of the extensive procedures involved in selecting subjects, constructing and validating the videotape stimuli, and developing the dependent measures. A detailed exposition of the experimental procedures is available from the author upon request.

[2] Female subjects were excluded due to the difficulty in equating the assertiveness of stimulus characters differing in sex, and the conceptual ambiguity in interpreting scores on the dominance measure for females.

[3] The measures of perceived assertiveness and affiliativeness and subjective confidence in these judgments were developed on the basis of factor analyses of subjects' ratings of the stimulus characters on 38 bipolar trait scales, and all have been shown to possess adequate internal consistency (range: .82-.95). The inter-rater reliability of the free-response measures was assessed as .87, based on independent coding of a random sample of 20 descriptions by two coders.

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Table 1

Personality Differences in Person Impressions

Measure	Perceiver Personality: Dominant	Perceiver Personality: Succorant	t(158)
Perceived Assertiveness	35.52	36.26	< 1.00
Perceived Affiliativeness	43.14	43.02	< 1.00
Salience of Assertive Qualities	.42	.33	1.75*
Salience of Affiliative Qualities	.09	.13	1.75*
Confidence in Impressions of Assertiveness	38.75	36.41	2.26**
Confidence in Impressions of Affiliativeness	43.66	42.57	1.01

*$p < .05$, one-tailed

**$p < .02$, one-tailed

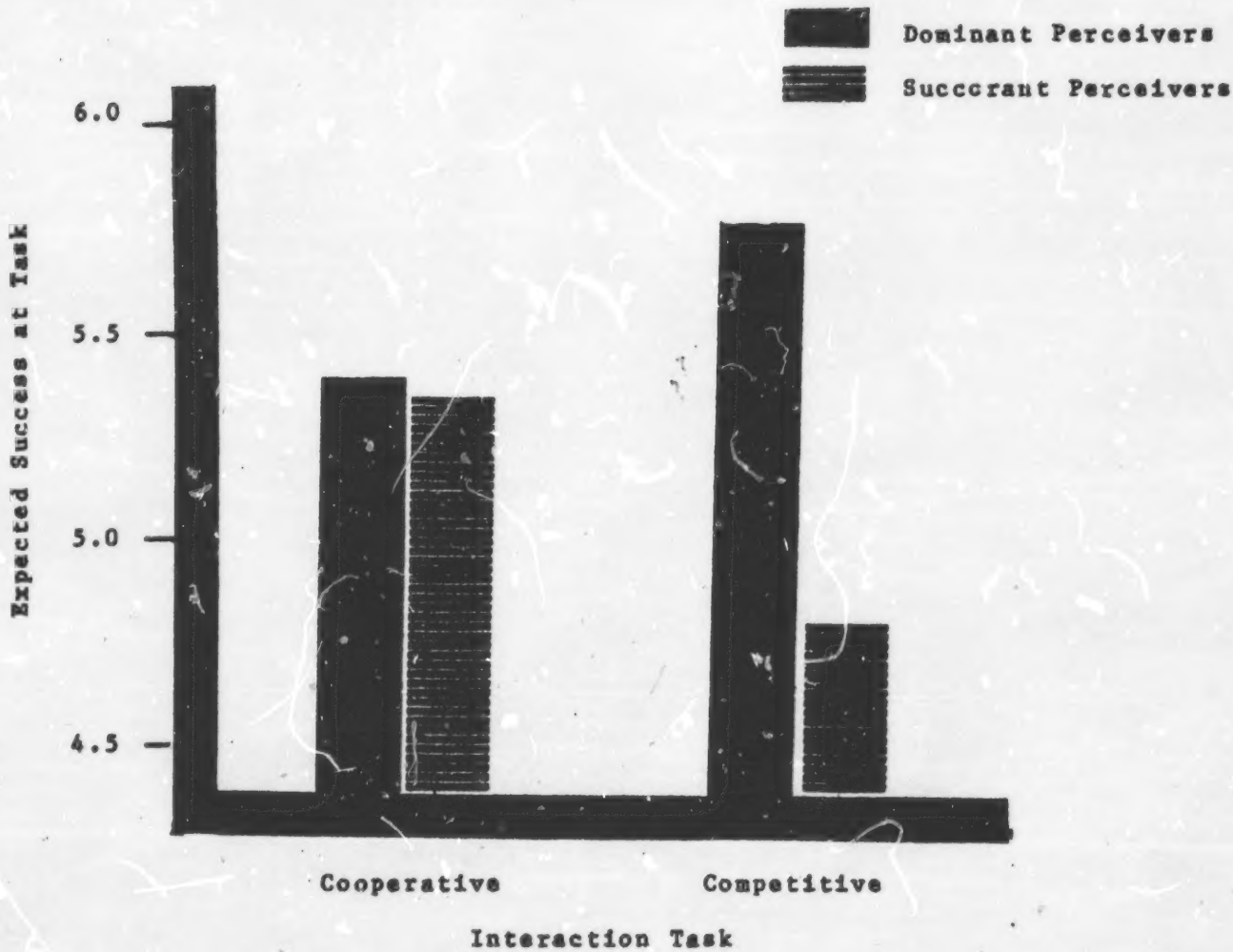

Figure 1. Expected Interaction Outcome as a Function of Personality and Interaction Condition

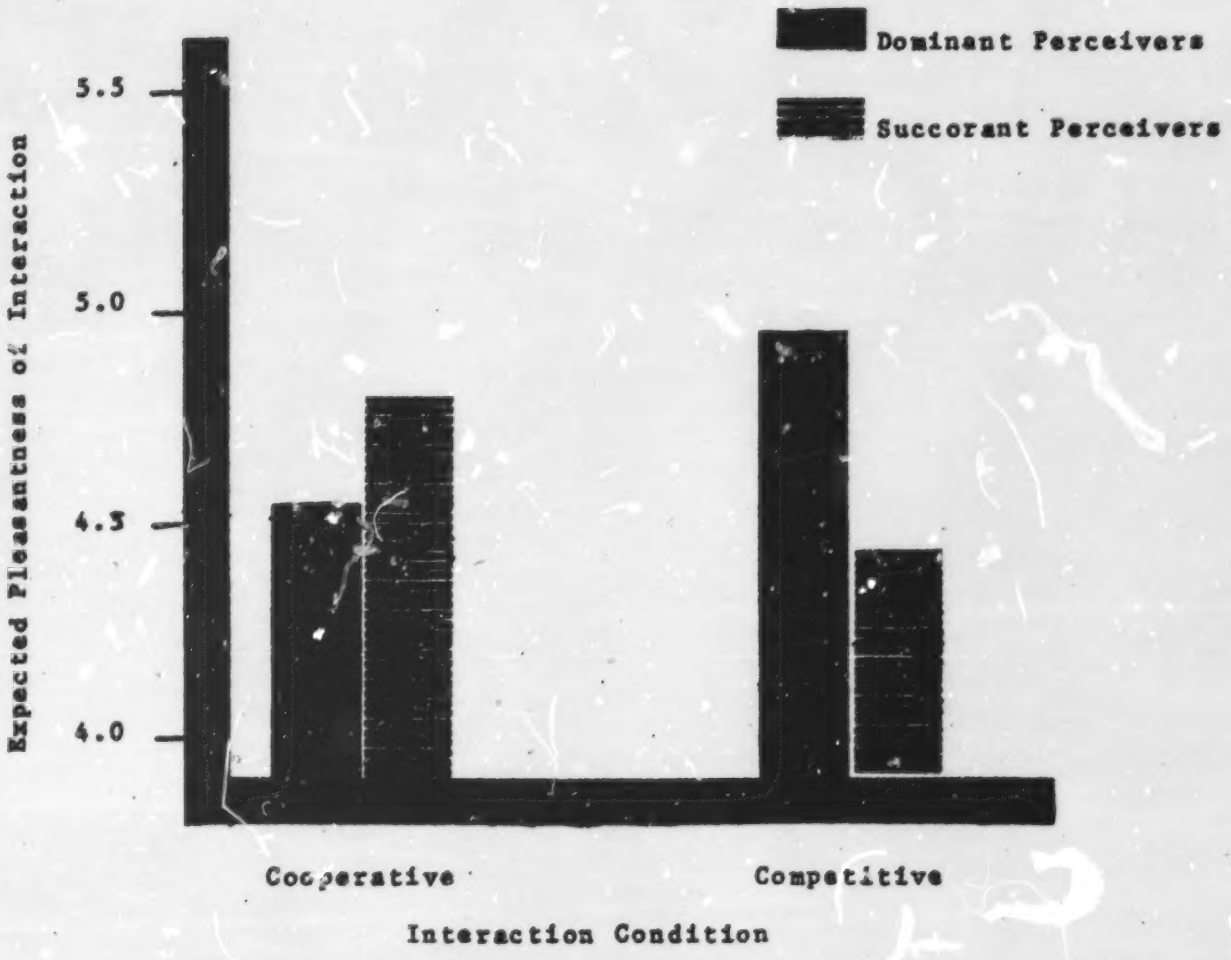

Figure 2. Expected Pleasantness of Interaction as a Function of Personality and Interaction Condition

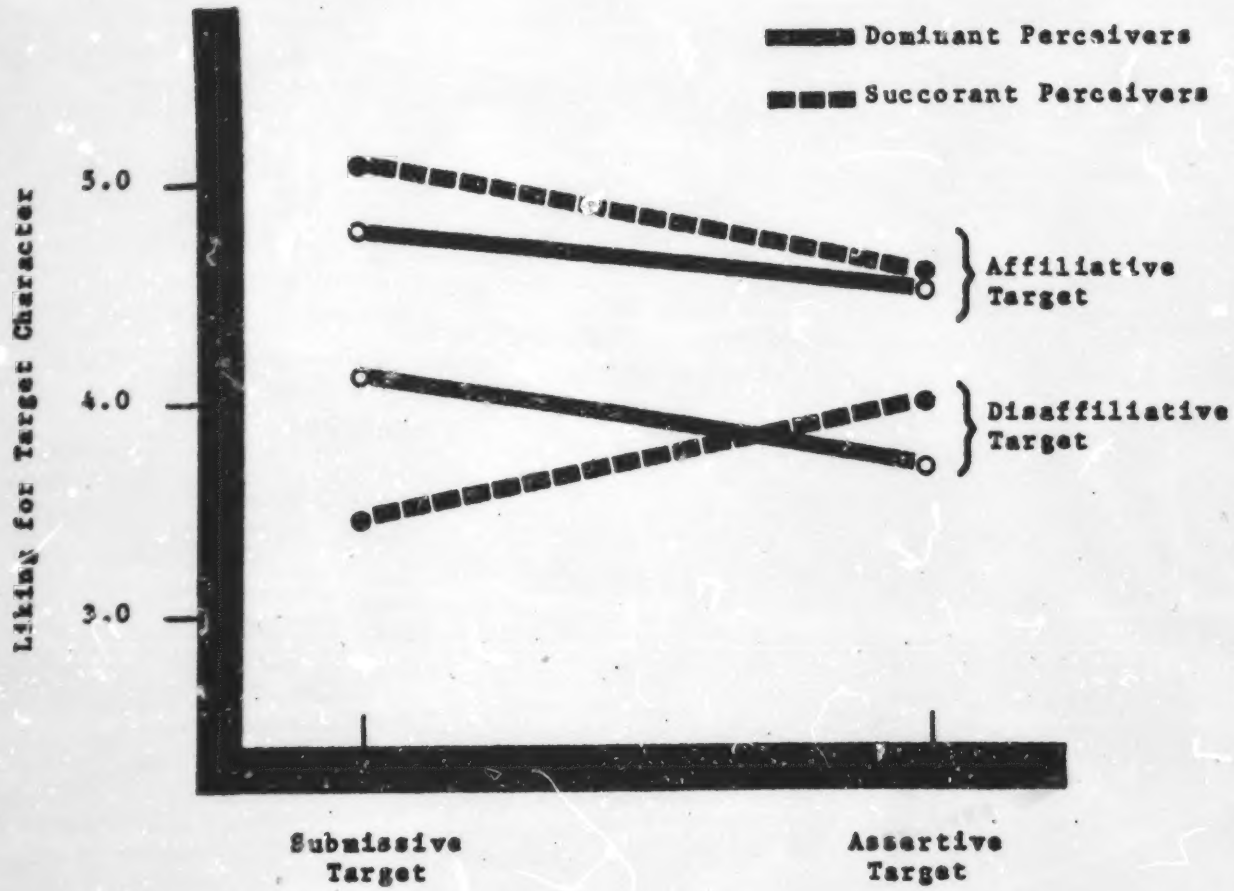

Figure 3. Attraction to Target Person as a Function of Personality, Target Assertiveness, and Target Affiliativeness